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Picture this: It's '63 again at theater

By Lori K. Johnson
OF THE TIMES HERALD STAFF

The Texas Theatre is getting a face lift courtesy of Oliver Stone's Camelot Productions.

A construction company hired by Camelot began removing the white stucco facade covering the original architecture Tuesday, revealing Italian Renaissance Revival underneath. But the cosmetic changes are a fraction of the renovations needed to restore the theater to its splendor.

Stone's efforts, which carry a price tag of about $10,000, will include moving the doors back about 10 feet to their original place and installing a box office and playbill frames out front.

Stone is restoring the theater for his movie on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which begins filming April 15.

They are the first major changes that have been made to the theater since the Texas Theatre Historical Society bought it last fall for $175,000.

The group has estimated that the total restoration project will cost $1.5 million.

But with the theater serving once again as a discount movie house — two movies for $2 — the money is going to be difficult to raise.

The building — inside and out — was covered with white stucco during remodeling in 1964, one year after Lee Harvey Oswald was apprehended at the theater 80 minutes after Kennedy was shot on Nov. 22, 1963.

"We're probably one of the very few non-profit organizations in the state that run a discount theater," said Dennis Hamilton, the society's president.

Overhead is low because with the exception of one paid employee — the janitor — the theater is run strictly by volunteers.

Ticket and concession sales pay the bills each month, but there isn't much left over for improvements. That money will probably have to come from foundation grants or special fund-raising events, he said.

When they took possession of the building, members of the historical group tore up some of the carpet in the lobby to reveal the marble floor and punched holes in the walls, exposing the woodwork and plaster.

Hamilton stressed that the theater, at 231 W. Jefferson Blvd. in East Oak Cliff, will remain open throughout the renovation process.

Offering cheap movies in a family atmosphere is "one of the ways we're getting support from the community," Hamilton said.

Jeff Flach, locations manager for Camelot Productions, said he hopes the repairs will spark the public's interest in the theater again.

"It'll definitely help in that it'll get people encouraged about what that facade used to look like."

Mark Williams/Dallas Times Herald

Billy Sellers, left, of Sellers Construction Co. pounds at the plaster covering the facade of the Texas Theatre in Oak Cliff. The renovation work is being done for the upcoming Oliver Stone movie about the assassination of President Kennedy.